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ABSTRACT

Different kinds of child care organizations (day care centers and homes, nurseries, and Head Start compensatory programs) are discussed. A description of the nursery program affiliated with the Berkeley Unified School District points out the delineation between classical or "social-emotional development" emphasis in child care, and the newer trend toward early academic instruction. At the Berkeley nursery, which emphasizes parent participation, it was found that many black parents wanted their children to receive basic academic instruction at an earlier age than many white parents, who advocated a non-rigid, social program for their children. The danger of stifling the creativity of preschool programs by assimilating them into elementary schools is also discussed. (ST)

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The Impact of Integration on Early Childhood Education

Paper prepared for the annual meetings of the Pacific Sociological Association, Scottsdale, May, 1973

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Early childhood education has traditionally been one of the most marginal branches of American public education. Pre-school programs are not subject to the same compulsory attendance laws that apply to elementary and secondary schools; the actual availability of such programs varies from region to region, with often a child being turned away for lack of space; in the vast majority of cases, programs serving the young child are not administered as parts of public school districts.[1] Another indication of the marginality of early childhood education is simply the lack of common agreement as to what this term actually refers to: historically, the phrase has been applied to a wide variety of arrangements, from private nursery schools to Headstart programs to daycare centers.

A number of current developments, however, are converging to dramatically change the status of early childhood education. The women's movement with its call for "childcare;" the tremendous resurgence of interst in this country in the work of Piaget and other cognitivists;[2] the increasing crisis of accountibility faced by elementary and secondary schools as they fail to deliver for Third World children--all have contributed to a growing legitimacy for early education. One manifestation of this new legitimacy are developments, such as those currently underway in California, to bring early childhood education programs directly in to the public schools; this has been a major priority of California's relatively new State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Wilson Riles.[3] One implication of the new public school setting for early education is that these programs, which have traditionally been racially and socially segregated, will now become, for the first time on a large scale--integrated.

The task of this paper will be to discuss how the fact of integration itself will help shape the character of publically provided early childhood education.

Historical background

Before I discuss the current situation in early childhood education, it will be useful to offer some brief background material on the field. I will outline four major forms of pre-school arrangments--all of which, to some degree, having been associated in the public mind as "early childhood education." This brief outline should suggest the extent to which these various options have been essentially segregated.

a) Nursery schools

Nursery schools have largely been a middle and upper middle class institution.[4] They are typically private, often run as parent-co-operatives; whether administered by a parent board or not, nurseries are usually staffed by persons who have received university degrees in "early childhood education" or related subjects. The nursery curriculum is geared toward "social-emotional development"; an aspect of classical nursery training was to caution against the dangers of "premature" learning. Of all the four categories of pre-school programs that I will mention, nursery schools have perhaps the most objective claims of "professionalization:" in fact, we might consider one of the chief status problems of these professionals precisely to be that they so often have trouble differentiating themselves, in the mind of the laymen, from the other three tendencies I am about to

mention.

b) Daycare centers and homes

A second tradition of pre-school program is the daycare center or home (the former being institutionally based, the latter taking place in a private home.). Such efforts have typically served the children of employed women, especially women from the working class. The "curriculum" of daycare has essentially been custodial--the main objective being supervision of children, and not especially "enrichment."[5] While daycare operators normally have to obtain ~~licen~~ licenses (although many in fact do not, and operate quasi-illegally), college training is not a pre-requisite.

c) Headstart

A third, and relatively recent, variation of preschool services is the "compensatory" type program of which Headstart is the best known example. Such programs grew out of the War on Poverty of the 1960's, and were aimed specifically at the "culturally deprived" child. (In many instances, though not all, the clientele were almost totally Third World). The curriculum of compensatory programs included, among other things, a deliberately academic component; the purpose of the programs were, literally, to give the child a "Headstart" in his forthcoming elementary school career. Staff for these program varies widely from program to program, and includes a number of paraprofessionals, but typically head teachers are credentialed in early education.

d) Childcare

"Childcare" is the newest, and least defined, term in the pre-school lexicon. As I mentioned earlier, it is a term strongly associated with the women's movement; hypothetically, one might say that all children are the ultimate targets of childcare programs. Although childcare does not yet have as specific a character as the above three types, a distinguishing feature that seems to be emerging from childcare deliberations is the insistence on user-control of any such programs. The importance of childcare, for the purposes of our present discussion, is to note that the intensive lobbying of women's groups and others for childcare has been very instrumental in increasing the visibility of all the various forms of pre-school programs.

Of the four types of program described above, the nursery school tradition and the compensatory one are the most directly linked to the profession of early childhood education: personnel in each type of program have specialized academic training; each program has as its rationale the "enrichment" of young children. But in spite of these similarities, there is, of course, a very important difference. Nursery educators, as I pointed out, are committed to a model of "socio-emotional" growth and are aggressively against academic instruction. In the Headstart -type situation, where the entire orientation is toward the child's imminent entrance into elementary school, there is strong emphasis on cognitive skills. Thus, although both nursery teachers and Headstart workers are ostensibly engaged in the same enterprise of "early childhood education",

there exist between them widely divergent views on the capabilities of young children, the proper methods and techniques to be used in work with children, etc.

This difference in philosophy between nursery school and Headstart teachers is symptomatic of a split that is becoming intensified throughout the early childhood education profession as a whole. On the one hand, there are the "old-timers" who cling to the affective model; on the other, there are what have been called the "new mind-builders", those cognitive psychologists who though primarily interested in "disadvantaged" children, are arguing that all children can benefit from learning before the age of 6.[6] As early childhood education programs are brought into the public schools, we can anticipate that this conflict which runs through the profession will manifest itself in this new setting.

Research findings

With this background of educational controversy in mind, we can now begin to speculate what will the course of early childeducation be in public schools? More specifically, what will be the outcome of this conflict in school districts that are, to a significant extent, integrated? The study I have been conducting for the past few years of a parent-participating nursery program that is affiliated with the Berkeley Unified School District offers some suggestive answers to these questions. In the period before the desegregation of Berkeley schools, when this program was overwhelmingly white, both staff and parents agreed on the standard nursery curriculum of "social" development. In the years since 1968, however, as the program has become completely integrated, black parents (with

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the collusion of some black staff) have exerted great pressures on the program to incorporate basic skill instruction. As a Black member of Berkeley's School Board told this program's administrators: "Black parents want you to teach their kids to write the minute those little fingers can pick up a pencil." As a subtheme to these academic demands, the black parents also have been pressuring the nurseries to institute firmer disciplinary policies. As one parent complained, "Whats she (daughter) going to do when she gets to real school if they let her run around here all day?"

The response of white parents to these new sets of demands has been somewhat mixed, but essentially we might think in terms of a trade-off: white parents, by and large, are willing to go along with the introduction of basic skill instruction to the school curriculum; however, they closely monitor the <u>form</u> such instruction takes: "I guess its all right if they teach him reading--as long as he is enjoying himself, and as long as they're not pushing him." As a corrolary to this, the white parent group also resists the black parents' requests that the school tighten up its disciplinary policies.

My observations suggest that Berkeley's early childhood education staff have attempted to accomodate to <u>both</u> sets of demands of parents. The nursery curriculum has changed substantially in the direction of the cognitive; one can now enter a Parent-nursery and see children playing with "educational lotto" sets, others working at Math Centers, children's writing displayed on the walls, etc. All these activities, a few years ago, would have been unthinkable. At the same time, however, the pedagogic devices used in this revamped program still retain a very distinctive <u>nursery</u> flavor--individualized instruction is favored

over large group lessons, there is heavy emphasis on parent involvement, "play" is still seen as a legitimate avenue to learning, scheduling is ultra-flexible, etc. But while at this moment the program seems to have achieved the right balance between the black parents' demand for academic content, and the whites' demand for non-rigid form, in the future it may be more difficult to sustain this combination. Plans are underway in the District for the presently separate Parent-nurseries to be housed directly within elementary school sites. In one sense, this development might be seen as a "victory" for this program--from a rather marginal position in the District, it is being elevated to a far more secure situation. Yet the nursery staff greatly fear this prospect; their assumption is that all that is uniquely "nursery school" will disappear in the new environment. As worried teachers put it, "How can we run out program in a school that operates on bells, where you are supposed to be outside only at recess, when parents aren't supposed to be hanging around, when you have one teacher for 30 kids, when you are not supposed to make too much noise or the principal gets angry?"

Analysis

Recognizing that in many respects, Berkeley is an atypical school district, what, nonetheless, can we generalize from this very brief "life history" of this particular early childhood program? The first thing that this case points out to us is the overwhelming pressures on the profession to move toward a cognitively-oriented program. In addition to the other factors we have mentioned--the new theoreticians of "early learning", the "compensatory"movement , the higher levels of educational bureaucracis--another quite powerful force

advocating this change are the parent-clients of these programs, most notably black parents. While it is hardly the norm in our society to have clients share public institutions, I would argue that early childhood services represent a special case. First, in theoretical terms, early childhood education's status as a relatively "weak" profession makes it vulnerable to client demands;[7] more to the point, however, the role of clients in such programs take on a special intensity because of the widespread ambivalence in our society about provision of out-of-home services for very young children. This theme was captured well in President Nixon's veto message in 1971 of the Child Development Act when he spoke against the "family-weakening" implications of such programs. As an attempt at resolving this ambivalence, many early childhood programs--including the one I observed in Berkeley--have their funding agreements tied to regular parent involvement. Therefore, I would argue that more so than in other levels of the educational system, clients in such settings have the potential to effect the nature of these programs.

The second clue that the Berkeley situation gives us about the future course of early childhood education is the danger to the profession's "integrity" that is posed by the assimilation into elementary schools. Lazerson[8] has pointed out that there are striking similarities between the current situation of early childhood education and that of the kindergarten movement in the nineteenth century; when kindergartens became absorbed into the public school system, they quickly lost their most creative aspects. Thus, an important empirical question for observers of early childhood education in the next few years will be to note the extent to which the profession is able to retain its unique characteristics in its new environment.

Notes

[1] Ellis Evans, Contemporary Influences in Early Childhood Education, New York, Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1971.

[2] For a discussion of this, see Maya Pines, Revolution in Learning, N.Y. Harper and Row, 1966.

[3] See Report on Task Force on Early Childhood Education to Superintendent Riles, Sacremento, Superintendent's office, 1971.

[4] See, for example, Patricia Bourne,"The Three Faces of Day Care," in Louise K. Howe, ed., The Future of the Family, N.Y. Simon Scuster, 1973. See also John Seeley, et. al, Crestwood Heights, N.Y. John Wiley, 1963.

[5] Bourne,"The Three Faces of Day Care."

[6] Pines, Revolution in Learning.

[7] Harold Wilensky,"The Professionalization of everyone"? American Journal of Sociology, LXX, n.2, September, 1964.

[8] Marvin Lazerson, "Social Reform and Early Childhood Education: Some Historical Perspectives," Urban Education, April, 1970.